

A GENTLEMAN'S PREROGATIVE.

"THE many fail, the few succeed," is an aphorism so old, that its authorship, no doubt, had we the means at hand, could be traced to Father Noah himself,—his last utterance to the wicked world as he shut the door of the ark, and retired to safety and solitude.

Yet a greater amount of success in life, I think, might be generally attained, if, instead of abusing circumstances, which we are all ready to do, we were to endeavor to fit in the angles of character to the nooks and corners of destiny.

No one is surprised when the reckless and dissipated come to a disastrous termination of their career, but many a one of honorable instincts and unsullied morality falls short of expectation, and makes as dismal a conclusion.

There must be some reason for this, and a modest theory of my own on this vexed question has been, for many a year, that elegant tastes, without proportionate means to back them, bring as much trouble upon the possessor as absolute want of capacity, or even wrong-doing in its widest sense. And he who is ruled by his inclinations, apparently harmless, in opposition to duty, will make shipwreck before his voyage is ended, no matter how gallantly his vessel sails out of port.

A friend of my youth is just dead. He entered the narrow circle of my intimates at boarding-school, more than thirty years ago, and was the pride and glory of our whole class. Even then he was a most elegant-looking boy, and became the especial pet of the teacher, who found him clever and gentlemanlike, and to the rest of us, rough country lads, he was indeed a model of style. His father was not a rich man; indeed his income was no larger than that of my own parent, but as this last was the anxious owner of ten unruly children, he was in proportion poorer than old Mr. Centend, whose only child was our aforesaid hero.

So, when my coat was shabby, it was still worn with noble indifference to color or size; my boots were in a terrible state of patchedness before new ones were forthcoming, and

as to pocket-money, my poor father, work as hard as he could, was always behindhand with my monthly allowance. Eight more sons at home and one delicate little daughter ate up his small income with fearful rapidity. I therefore grew up with very simple ideas as to what was necessary and what superfluous, and the sight of Paul Centend's toilette apparatus, which he displayed before us school-boys, a short time after his arrival, gave me no pang of envy, although I could appreciate the elegance of its arrangement. "Father wanted to give me a common, trashy dressing-case," said the young fellow, quite at his ease in displaying his treasure, "but I wouldn't have it."—"I don't like a thing any better because it is expensive, you know, boys, but I think the best is always the cheapest, and I would do without, a hundred years, rather than start with one of those nasty japanned things the other fellows have. So the governor forked up this, though it's my selection entirely—perfectly plain and solid, with silver tops to everything—I hate shams."

"Do you choose your own clothes too?" said I, looking at the admirable material and cut of his coat; "your father must be very indulgent to you to permit that."

"Oh! my father is a regular brick, and never refuses me anything necessary for a gentleman; and let me tell you," he added with a knowing wink, "that there is not a fellow of my age in New York who knows how to choose a coat better than I. I am not bragging," he said, laughing and coloring a little, "but it's truth, every word I say."

A great big lump of a boy, who never knew his lessons, but had brains to be saucy when he liked, and who had not said a word till this moment, gave a contemptuous sneer.

"If you and your father are such big folks," he said, with a grin, "I wonder you ever came to a country school at all with us small fry—I wouldn't, I'd be hanged first."

"Do be hanged now, Wilson; don't stand on time," was Paul's reply. "It will be an immense relief to us all, and the professors too, no doubt."

Thus it was that Centend took the *pas* of us boys, and in a few months led the class like an old bell-wether. With me alone, however, he was really on an intimate footing. I was his chum, and had it not been for early education, which had given my mind a strong bias, I might have been led into trouble by the association. In all his habits and thoughts Centend was a gentleman, and opposed to anything rude or disorderly, but his judgment on the subject of expense never underwent change, and his decrees as to what every one should wear, buy, and spend were fixed by his own experience, and immutable.

Many were the amicable discussions that took place between Paul and me, on this fruitful subject, and as he grew more decided in his utterances, I became more stubborn in my opinions, and on this "moot point" eternal warfare raged.

I never shall forget one afternoon when Centend caught me with a pair of cheap white gloves that I had purchased at half price at the country store. This extravagance had emptied my purse and made my countenance fall, but there was to be a wedding at the Professor's house that evening, and we were all expected to appear in white gloves and cravats. It was impossible to stay away without giving offence, and I had therefore made this sacrifice to society, but not without a pang.

Paul took the gloves from me, turned them coolly over, and handed them back with a contemptuous shrug.

"Cheap and nasty, I see," said he, laughing. "You never will learn wisdom, Jack, and buy your things tip-top."

"These are good enough for one evening," said I quietly; "white gloves don't last any longer, and beside I can't afford any better; these took all that was left of my allowance."

"You should have written home for more money."

"I wouldn't do that, whatever happened; not if I had to wear mittens."

"Then you are a jackass; I would rather beg, borrow, or steal a first-rate pair of kids than go in those."

"I shall go in these, and have a nice time in spite of cheap gloves; I am only a boy,

and nobody expects us to be elegant or handsomely gotten up here."

"I shall always be dressed as a gentleman should, if it takes the last stiver I have got in the world. Every one notices dress, and besides I hate mean clothes."

"It is the meanest thing in the world to have what you can't afford, or can't pay for."

"Nonsense! the *pater familias* is an animal that expects to be fleeced; he likes it, no matter how loudly he *baas*."

"Well, my father has no fleece to spare, and when I leave school I have got to work hard and push my own way in the world. I am not going to encumber myself with a load of elegant tastes. Common clothes, plain fare, will be my lot for years, perhaps for life, and it is as well to submit to circumstances until I can overcome them."

Paul said no more. He was too kind-hearted to dwell upon my uncertain prospects, and felt really much commiseration for what seemed to him abject poverty; but this conversation had the effect to confirm us both in our preconceived opinions.

Three years passed away, and we separated to enter life on different pathways.

With much difficulty my father obtained for me a place in a city lawyer's office, where I studied, and received at the same time a small salary for doing ordinary office work. If my elegant friend Paul had seen me in the shabbiest of clothes, and on the scantiest of fare, working like a veritable beast of burden, I doubt whether a hearty scolding, or a heartier shake of the hand would have been his greeting. As it was, not till time had carried me rather higher up on the rounds of fortune's ladder did we meet again, and then he welcomed me with a cordiality that revived the affection of early years. He had been through college, and was now on his way to Europe to finish his studies and see the world.

"You are your own master now," said I, glancing at his faultless mourning suit, evidently in its first freshness.

"Yes, and I miss my father terribly, although he was always pounding it into me about my extravagance. However, he was a true friend, and left me all he had in the world.



Not so much, after all. Only \$50,000. But it's a nice little sum."

"You can live very comfortably on that abroad," said I. "The income will support you if you get in a cheap place."

"No cheap places for me," said Centend, laughing. "You know I don't believe in that sort of thing. The best of everything is the cheapest, 'in fare, wear, and stare,' and to see the world and eat and be clothed decently is the prerogative of a gentleman."

I sighed. "It is not the fate of all," I said. "Some must struggle while others enjoy. However, it is all right in the end, no doubt."

"Jack," said Centend quickly, "come out in the steamer with me. You want a holiday sadly, and the run across will do you good. You can go for a month or so to Paris, and return in the autumn. It won't cost you much, and I'll back you to any extent. You are such an economical old squaretoes, that having you along will lessen my expenses by half. For you know I have no dissipations."

This was true, for Centend, extravagant as he was in everything he bought or used, was too elegant to enjoy *fast* city life, and spent his time in the choicest society, where he was sure to find the highest culture and most congenial entertainment.

I need hardly say that Centend went to Europe alone. I fagged away, often heart-sick and weary, till a sudden turn of affairs put me in as junior partner of the firm in which I first entered as humble assistant. Also about this time my father died, leaving an unsullied name behind him, and a property that, divided between ten children, gave each of them \$5,000. All of my brothers were now settled, most of them in a distant part of our country, and my only sister, a pretty little creature of nineteen, was claimed by me as her elder brother, and head of the family.

Then, too, a hope long cherished, but frequently relinquished, became at once feasible as it was delightful. I could now possess a home of my own, simple and plain,—for this alone my means permitted,—but still my own, where my sister and one other person, even dearer, should take their places by the hearthstone, and rule by right of authority and affection.

This was fifteen years ago, be it remembered; a man in those happy days could buy a small house at a moderate price, and furnish it, without utter ruin, at the upholsterer's. Indeed the snug dwelling which so comfortably contained my household goods, my dear little Susie, and my still more charming Caroline, was in itself nothing remarkable, but to my eyes the abode of happiness and luxury.

As it chanced, about two months after my marriage, I met accidentally my friend Paul Centend in the street not far from my own house, looking for lodgings after a prolonged tour in Europe. Never was a friend more affectionately greeted than I; never did my heart respond more warmly to Centend's kindly interest.

I invited him immediately to my house, and promised him unlimited hospitality from my wife and sister.

I shall never forget Paul's first visit at my modest domicile. He "took stock" in a moment of all my economical arrangements, and a smile, which brought back reminiscences of boyhood, lit up his face as with a gleam of sunshine.

"The same old two-and-sixpence are you, my boy, as when first we met 'upon the banks of Dee'! And does your adored admire mahogany and hair-cloth, and condescend to put her feet on a villanous three-ply? She must be very much in love indeed."

"I hope she is," said I, laughing; "at any rate she is contented, apparently, with me and my belongings. I have done as well for her as I could afford, and she knows it and is satisfied; indeed, happily for my pocket, neither of us has expensive tastes, nor sighs for what is unattainable."

"There is the mistake you always make, my dear fellow; a handsome thing at double the common price is the cheapest, because it does not go out of fashion and lasts longer. Depend upon it, real wood furniture and the heaviest carpets are the best investments in the end."

"Certainly for a rich man, but I have not money to pay for such things, and in debt I will never be."

"There you are again. Who talks about debt? Everybody says you have money put

away in an old stocking, and can afford to do as you please."

"That is a mistake. I have a good business and this house, and cannot afford to use everything up in the present."

Centend now planted himself on the corner of my comfortable though despised sofa, and discoursed eloquently for two mortal hours about his European tour, his present plans and future intentions.

"Now I am going to work," he said, laughing. "I am educated to a point that will make me a useful person in any capacity, and will undertake any kind of business which will be at the same time very light and very remunerative."

"Remunerative! You, one of the lucky ones, talking of work! What will happen next?"

"Well, Jack, the fact of it is, that a tour in Europe cuts into one's capital in the wofullest style imaginable. I don't know whether I should have gone, had I known how things would really have turned out; but you see, traveling first-class and all that sort of thing is expensive, and of course nothing else is fit for a gentleman."

"Ahem. And I suppose there are many other ways of getting rid of one's money besides traveling first-class."

"Well, you know I never gamble, and don't prefer running in debt, or trouble of any kind, it is so intensely vulgar. But I did give some of the neatest dinners in Paris ever got up by an American. I don't mind telling you that, and it made a dreadful hole in my purse, I assure you."

"I am sorry to hear it. You are one of those who can't afford to be poor; your tastes are too elegant."

"Stop laughing at me, Jack, and give me the best advice as to what I shall do;" and here Paul, relying on my faithful friendship, gave me a long account of his financial difficulties, for, having spent nearly two-thirds of his capital, his means were entirely too limited to suit his ideas as to what was absolutely necessary for a gentleman's decent appearance.

At this turn of proceedings my wife and sister suddenly entered the room. They had

been out shopping together, and as they came into the parlor, animated and blooming, I thought I had never seen two more lovely or elegant women.

That the same idea had occurred to Centend struck me immediately as he rose to be formally introduced. A look, which I knew to be one of pleasure and surprise, lit up his fine features, and rendered his fascinating manners more *pronounced* than ever. Centend stayed to dinner that day, and ate his beefsteak off English china with such a relish that "I wondered as I gazed." Perhaps, however, the flavor was rendered tolerable by the presence of the ladies, who, being easy in their manners, lively in their conversation, and, above all, attractive in appearance, made the meal pass, for me at least, like a banquet of the gods. When Paul left us that evening he squeezed my hand long and hard.

"Well, by Jove! my dear Jack," he said, "I believe you have the best of it, after all. I can't say I admire your choice of houses or furniture, but your taste in women is without fault. Your Caroline is handsome enough for a duchess, and that little blue-eyed sister of yours is as lovely as an angel. I wish I were a rich man," he added, with a great sigh, "then I could be happy too, and marry for love."

"No, no, that can't be thought of," said I, laughing. "*You* can't afford to marry for love. Make up to some heiress who wants somebody to help her spend her money. That is the course for you, my dear fellow, and the sooner it is done the better it will be for your pocket."

I went back to the parlor, much pleased with my friend's visit. Caroline and Susie had already taken Paul into their good graces, and the warm interest I had so long felt for my school-mate was soon shared by both these sympathetic women.

But alas! for the blindness of masculine eyes. Paul's visits, which now came on "fast and furious," ostensibly to consult me as to his entrance on a business career, had really another object, and I, foolish bat of a fellow, never saw that it was Susie's blue eyes that attracted him, and not our plain dinners and my still plainer talk. I even laughed at my wife when she mildly insinuated that she

thought Paul's looks were wandering and melancholy when our little charmer was not within visible distance.

"My dear love," said I, with the knowing air of a man who has been down to the very roots of human nature, and knew every fibre of the same, "women who think men like Paul Centend have any hearts to lose are mightily mistaken. He has been all over the world and seen all sorts of beauty, and come back perfectly heart-whole. It is not in our little back parlor, over a girl as unsophisticated as Susie, that this man of fashion is to become spooney. No, no. Besides, he is as poor as a church-mouse."

"Very well, Jack," said Caroline, puckering up her mouth, and looking as wise as an owl, "have it your own way, my dear; but remember, if anything comes of it, I have warned you beforehand. You forget that your friend Centend is a great admirer of elegance, and every one admits that your sister is as graceful as she is handsome; also Mr. Centend never denies himself any luxury that he thinks suited to his position, and as to poverty, he knows nothing of its reality—only the shadow of it haunts him, while he has a penny that he can call his own."

Still these words made but little impression, and Paul came and went, as fancy led him, altogether unquestioned by me.

It was nearly a year after this that Susie walked into my room one morning and told me, laughing and blushing, that Centend had offered himself, and she had accepted him. Had the skies fallen I could not have been more surprised, for Paul, in all his private confidences, had never approached this subject. Neither was I at all gratified, for, fond as I was of Centend, I loved my sister far more dearly, and I dreaded lest the man she had chosen should fail in his duty to protect her. I immediately, of course, when it was too late, did all I could to prevent this marriage, which was in many respects very unsuitable. Paul was one of those who should never have married at all, or at any rate entered into the holy bonds only under the most brilliant auspices.

To deny himself or his elegant tastes, to live for others, and be content to work and

suffer for them, was something he had never conceived of, much less put in practice, and to all such marriage is, or ought to be, impossible.

Well, they married, notwithstanding, and I gave my dear Susie away with eyes dimmed with tears, and more sighs in my speech than congratulations; while my wife, ready always to look on the bright side, and make the best of everything, planned the arrangements as pleasantly as our limited means would permit.

And Susie went out into her new life with a man she adored, and who loved her as Isaac in the simple times of old loved the wife whom he had sought so faithfully; but alas! for the simplicity of those happier days; they are gone never to return. Flocks and herds will not suffice the modern requirements of taste, neither in the shape of wholesome provisions or comfortable clothing. Furniture, china, and silver must not only be good, but beautiful, artistically designed, and very costly, otherwise they fail to come up to the standard that fashion has erected, and which few have the courage to rebel against. My views on this subject were original, but it was in vain I endeavored to impress them upon these my best friends. Paul finally obtained an office in the Custom House, given him through the influence of his *quondam* school-mate Wilson, now a flourishing politician; and with this to furnish an income, and a really beautiful home, which he bought and furnished with all that was left of his patrimony and Susie's five thousand dollars, Centend and his wife began their housekeeping experience.

This was the time before the war, and things were not then as now at gold prices, but it was painful to see Centend struggling under the pressure of wants and tastes which he could not deny or control. Before the first year was out, there was anxiety written on Susie's rosy cheeks, and Paul, who would never deal with any but the best (that is to say, the most fashionable) butchers, bakers, and grocers, was no longer out of the power of trades-people, and trembled at the sight of a bill. Upon comparing accounts it was discovered by Susie, who, like most women, was the first to see the need of retrenchment, that their living and ours



differed much more in expense than comfort, our little establishment being kept by good management on about half what the Centends expended; but Paul's objections to deal in second-class shops, as he called them, for a time checked his wife's efforts to economize. A few years of this sort of thing and a family of young children changed, however, the absolute necessity of the case.

Paul, his love of elegance not a whit abated, but his purse absolutely empty, gave up the reins of power into his wife's hands and allowed her to manage matters in the only way that was possible. Centend never before was given to bursts of ill-temper, indeed his natural disposition was amiable, but as the sweetest wine is said to make the sharpest vinegar, so Paul, cut short in his pleasures, his peculiar fancies, and his critical appetites, was fast becoming morbid, querulous, and fault-finding. Many a morning did Susie come round to our house to "have out" the good cry which she dared not indulge in at home. Many a surreptitious trifle for Paul's dessert, or a present for the children, was conveyed by Caroline from our domicile to theirs.

But all things have an end; Paul's office was taken from him by a change of political rulers, and, beset by duns and difficulties, ill health came upon him (the sure result of over-strained faculties), and typhus fever closed the catalogue of his misfortunes.

When Centend had sufficiently recovered from his long illness to look circumstances in the face, he found himself in a deplorable condition indeed. The war had just broken out, and swept away the hopes of happiness of thousands better anchored than he. What then had destiny to offer him? He had neither the physical strength nor a natural love for the soldier's profession, but he gloried in his country, and possessed that kind of courage which in refined and sensitive temperaments has so often produced great results in times of emergency and danger. He obtained a commission, and leaving his family with me, he traveled, almost from a sick-bed, into the heart of the battle-ground, there to bid a long farewell to elegant leisure and the luxuries of home. During all these years of blood and carnage, Paul was one of those whose

places are ever in the "deadliest breach." As if to dispel forever the dream that a gentleman's prerogative is the softest, the sweetest, and the best of what earth can furnish, *his* duty compelled him to the roughest fare, scanty slumbers, and weary and long night-marches. Others had furloughs, he could not obtain them; the delicacies sent by his friends at home never came to hand; to him at last fell the dreadful lot of Andersonville, and a bestial existence to which death would have been Paradise.

I can bear to tell the story now, when it is over, and he who bore himself so bravely is done with it all—for he came back at last, not to live and be happy, but to die and be happier; for he had, while conquering the enemy, learned to conquer himself, his own passions and weaknesses, and left the world a noble soul, one who had fulfilled his mission and was ready to depart.

Self-indulgence had tarnished the brightness of his character, but long months of suffering and privation had brought reflection, and with reflection new views of life, of death, and of the Christian's hope. Nor was he suffered to die in loneliness; those he loved were around him, and the hours that ushered him into the eternal world were peaceful and without regret.

"My dear Jack," he said, but a few days before his tranquil end, "how strangely my destiny has been shaped by Providence. A man who in youth never permitted himself an uncomfortable moment, is killed at last by the effect of the horrors of a southern prison. But for my poverty, I should never have left my home and dear ones, to do battle even in this righteous cause, and but for my expensive tastes I should never have been brought to this necessity. The evil that has happened to me is my own work, while the good I have been able to do has been the one blessing vouchsafed me by an overruling power. Let me entreat you, however, to warn my children against following in my footsteps. This life is not given us for enjoyment, or the cultivation of elegant tastes. The prerogative of a gentleman is the privilege of every human soul to 'do justly, to love mercy, and walk humbly with his God.'"